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Economic statistics: international trade statistics

Task force on International Trade Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honor to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Task Force on International Trade Statistics (Congener: World Trade Organization), which is contained in the annex. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request of the Commission at its thirtieth session.[1]

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 4* (E/1999/24), chap. I.B.).

* E/CN.3/2000/1.

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Annex

Report of the Task Force on International Trade Statistics*

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* Prepared by World Trade Organization (Convener).

I. Introduction

1. At its thirtieth session (New York, 1-5 March 1999), the Statistical Commission:[a]

(a) Agreed that the treatment of electronic commerce in international trade statistics should be clarified, particularly in terms of defining its coverage and methods of data collection; the Commission took note of the plan of the International Statistical Institute and the Singapore Department of Statistics to hold a meeting on the subject in December 1999;

(b) Endorsed the proposed work on a compiler's manual for international trade statistics, emphasized the importance of taking advantage of country experiences, and requested the United Nations Statistics Division to give special attention in the manual to the measurement of adjustments to customs statistics for balance-of-payments purposes;

(c) Recognized that there would be a continuing need by users for international trade statistics analysed according to the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC);

(d) Considered that it was important to evaluate the usefulness and applicability of trade statistics according to Central Product Classification (CPC) aggregates for economic analysis, and welcomed the intention of the United Nations Statistics Division to produce a data set of merchandise trade statistics according to the CPC (goods part) on diskette as an input into reviewing and evaluating that Classification and its use;

(e) Reconfirmed its support for the work of the United Nations Statistics Division on producing the planned publication on the statistical territories of the world for use in international merchandise trade statistics;

(f) Agreed that in the short term, the United Nations Statistics Division should maintain the Commodity Trade Statistics Database (Comtrade) as it currently exists but should develop, in consultation with users, a strategic plan for its rationalization, taking account of the continuing need for data according to SITC, as set out in paragraph 1 (c) above, and providing adequate lead time for users to adjust to the rationalization plan;

(g) Emphasized that the United Nations Statistics Division should continue its efforts to make Comtrade comprehensive in country coverage, and encouraged countries to provide their detailed commodity-by-partner trade statistics to the Division for inclusion in the Comtrade;

(h) Endorsed the efforts of the United Nations Statistics Division, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat) to rationalize their data-collection, processing and storage systems to reduce reporting burdens on countries, reduce duplicate processing and increase the compatibility of their databases.

II. Compiler's manual

2. A revised outline has been prepared. It reflects input from national statistical and customs administrations and members of the Task Force; the national administrators have also provided national material relevant to the manual. The outline includes a chapter on adjustments to customs statistics for balance-of-payments purposes. Several national experts have been engaged as consultants for preparing parts of the manual. Some members of the Task Force will also prepare parts of the manual.

III. International trade statistics analysed according to the Standard International Trade Classification

3. The United Nations Statistics Division Comtrade will continue to hold international trade statistics according to both the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) and SITC to meet user needs.

IV. International trade statistics analysed according to the Central Product Classification

4. The question as to whether trade statistics according to CPC would provide useful aggregates for analytical purposes was discussed. The United Nations Statistics Division offered to provide a data set of international trade statistics according to CPC to various organizations with a view to testing its

usefulness. The Commission will be informed of any outcomes at the time of the Commission session.

V. Definitions of statistical territory for countries and areas for use in international trade statistics

5. Members of the Task Force were presented with the final form of the information-gathering questionnaire. The revised questionnaire incorporates all suggestions by members received during and after the Brussels meeting held in 1998 and in response to a letter dated 10 December 1998. It was planned to send the questionnaire to countries soon after the Task Force meeting held from 8 to 10 March 1999.

VI. Rationalization of the Comtrade database

6. Discussion in the Task Force has concentrated on a technical solution that would permit the United Nations Statistics Division to continue to provide data according to all versions of HS and SITC rather than eliminating one or more of the classifications from the database (such as doing conversions of data from one classification to another at the time of extraction from the database rather than storing data according to multiple classifications). A strategic plan for the rationalization of Comtrade will be developed in connection with planning to accommodate trade statistics according to the revision of HS scheduled for implementation on 1 January 2002.

VII. Making the Comtrade database comprehensive in country coverage

7. The United Nations Statistics Division indicated that country coverage by Comtrade of detailed international trade statistics has further improved owing to the responsiveness of the responsible national administration to the continued regular contacts from the Division. Also, members of the Task Force have continued to use their contacts with countries to obtain data and make it available to the Division.

VIII. Cooperation between the United Nations Statistics Division, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Statistical Office of the European Communities to rationalize data collection

8. Cooperation has continued through multilateral contacts and in the context of the Task Force. The United Nations Statistics Division has decided in principle to no longer collect trade data individually from OECD member countries but to take data collected by OECD. That step will reduce the burden on member countries and improve comparability. A memorandum of understanding between the two organizations is being prepared. Further cooperative efforts will hopefully lead to uniform processing procedures, computer systems and sharing of processed data. Data-sharing possibilities are being explored with Eurostat, which is carrying out a comparison of the data that it receives from its member States with the data that send to OECD and the United Nations Statistics Division.

IX. Other matters

A. Index numbers of international trade: technical information

9. The United Nations Statistics Division has reviewed existing United Nations publications and requested a number of countries to provide technical information on their country practices in the compilation and dissemination of index numbers of international trade. Members of the Task Force will share their work and experience on index number compilation. Coordination with any related work in the Intersecretariat Working Group on Price Statistics will be ensured. A draft technical report is expected late in 2001.

B. Flow of data among international organizations

10. The United Nations Statistics Division is using all series of aggregate imports and exports in national currency and unit value/price and volume (quantum) index numbers reported by countries to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and published in *International Financial Statistics*. The United Nations Statistics Division continues to collect or estimate data for countries not reporting to IMF (some 60 countries and areas). The Division will adopt the IMF series of aggregate import and export values published in *International Financial Statistics* in United States dollars; the timing of implementation depends upon changes to be made to computer programmes in the Division, working out the full set of implications for conversion factors used by the Division in other areas of work, and the incorporating by IMF of revised annual data for their United States dollar figures.

11. The United Nations Statistics Division has continued to review the differences between the annual values of aggregate imports and exports provided by countries and stored in Comtrade (aggregates of detailed commodity-by-partner data) and the aggregate imports and exports also provided by countries and stored in the United Nations Statistics Division/IMF database. The aim is to harmonize those two data sets as far as possible. A number of differences have been explained and appropriate adjustments have been made either to Comtrade data or to the United Nations Statistics Division/IMF aggregate database; that work is ongoing.

C. Revision of the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System

12. The Task Force was informed by the World Customs Organization of the provisional list of amendments to HS, which will become effective 1 January 2002. On the basis of the provisional list, the United Nations Statistics Division has concluded that there is no need to revise SITC; the Division will prepare and issue a correlation table between HS 2002 and SITC, Revision 3.

D. Electronic discussion group for international trade statistics

13. To facilitate and improve communications the Task Force is using an electronic discussion group set up and moderated by the World Trade Organization and OECD.

E. Other business

Review of technical cooperation

14. Members of the Task Force exchanged information on their technical cooperation activities and joint participation in the conduct of some training workshops on international trade statistics. The Task Force requested members to keep Eurostat informed as the focal point.

Merchandise trade, national accounts and balance of payments

15. The Task Force decided to address the issue of the relationship between merchandise trade statistics, national accounts and balance of payments at its next session, reflecting the continuing attention being paid to the possibilities for future further harmonization between the concepts and definitions of international merchandise trade statistics, the System of National Accounts, 1993, and the fifth edition of the IMF *Balance of Payments Manual*.

Dates and venue of the next meeting

16. The Task Force decided to hold its next meeting from 21 to 23 March 2000 at the headquarters of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization at Vienna.

X. Points for discussion

17. The Commission may wish to comment on the work and plans of the Task Force.

Notes

[a] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 4* (E/1999/24), para. 24.